

Armchair Nation

An Intimate History of Britain in Front of the TV

Joe Moran

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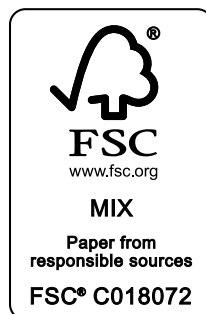
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CONTENTS

1	Switching on	1
2	A waking dream	13
3	A straight pencil-mark up the sky	51
4	The pale flicker of the Lime Grove light	89
5	The invisible focus of a million eyes	145
6	The dance of irrelevant shadows	189
7	A barrier against the silences	235
8	The age of warts and carbuncles	285
9	A glimmer on the dull grey tube	329
10	Closedown	367
	Notes	377
	Acknowledgements	425
	Picture credits	426
	Index	427



SWITCHING ON

The worst fate that can befall me is to be stranded in a town without a television set.

Matt Monro¹

In Scandinavia they call it ‘the war of the ants’. We had a black-and-white television set with a tuning dial like a radio, and every time you switched channels you encountered this snowstorm of static, which, if you squinted a bit, resembled black ants scurrying round a white floor. Since we also had an indoor aerial and lived in a valley in the foothills of the Pennines, the television, even when it was meant to be tuned into a channel, could still blight a favourite programme with these random bursts of electromagnetic noise. Switching on the television was not an action to be taken lightly, like flicking a light switch or turning on a tap. There was something fragile and precarious about the way the radio waves had to be picked out of the air, converted into electrons and fired across the cathode ray tube towards the phosphorescent screen – to make, if you were lucky, a moving picture, and if you weren’t, this atmospheric fuzz.

Television in our house was rationed, to half an hour a day. This law was policed inadequately, especially by our merciful mother, but its gesture to austerity was probably a blessing, for without it I would have watched television all the time. I was nearly two when, in January 1972, the telecommunications minister Christopher

Chataway brought an end to the last vestige of postwar rationing. The three channels, BBC1, BBC2 and ITV, would no longer be limited to 3,330 hours each per year, but could broadcast for as long as they liked. The age of plenty this decision ushered in, which coincided with the arrival of colour TV in most homes (but not ours), is now recalled as a lost age of one-nation television in which the same programmes were watched and loved by huge and diverse audiences, a diasporic national community loosely assembled in 19 million living rooms.

Children were the most voracious viewers. ‘As a child growing up in the early 1970s,’ the author D. J. Taylor has written, ‘I watched television in the way that a whale engulfs plankton: gladly, hectically and indiscriminately.’ The audiences for after-school television were huge (although also fickle, halving when the clocks went forward in the spring as children abandoned it for outdoors). Eighty per cent of British children watched *Scooby Doo*, a cartoon series in which a gang of teenagers and a cowardly Great Dane drove round in a van solving mysteries, invariably involving petty criminals disguised as ghosts. With this possible exception, children’s TV radiated that well-meaning ethos of healthful activity and curiosity about the world that also informed organisations like the Puffin Club for young readers and Big Chief I-Spy’s tribe of spotters. ‘What would make me happiest,’ said Monica Sims, head of children’s programmes at the BBC about her viewers, ‘would be if they went away.’²

This ethos inspired programmes like *Why Don’t You ... Switch Off the Television Set and Go and Do Something Less Boring Instead?*, which showed children how to make computers from index cards and knitting needles, or build their own hovercraft; *Vision On*, an inventively visual show for deaf children, which received about 8,000 artworks each week from mostly non-deaf children hoping to be displayed in its gallery; and the collective rituals of the BBC’s flagship children’s programme, *Blue Peter*, whose pioneering correspondence unit invited viewers to write in with good programme ideas, the reward for which was a coveted shield badge. The letters suggested a keen sense of ownership over the programme. ‘Dear Peter,’ wrote nine-year-old Ronald

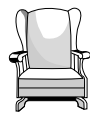
from Falkirk to the presenter Peter Purves, ‘I liked when you tried to ride a killer whale. I would like to see you try to skin dive and kill a shark. I have liked everything that *Blue Peter* has done especially that fort that Val made from lollypop sticks.’³ These participatory rituals – tutorials on how to create forts from lollypop sticks or dachshund draught excluders from ladies’ tights and old socks, and charitable appeals for silver paper or milk bottle tops which mysteriously converted into inshore lifeboats or guide dogs for the blind – seemed to be saying implicitly to us that we were not just a statistical aggregate of lots of individual viewers, but a virtual community, an extended family brought together twice weekly in front of the set.

Much of the television meant for adults also seemed to share this incantatory quality, this rhetorical conjuring up of collective life. The teatime magazine programme *Nationwide*, a *Blue Peter* for grown-ups which called itself ‘Britain’s nightly mirror to the face of Britain’, corralled the nation into imagined togetherness by segueing from discussions of the IMF bailout to film inserts about Herbie the skateboarding Aylesbury duck. The consumer show *That’s Life* was a similarly strange miscellany of high street vox pops, funny newspaper misprints and interviews with eccentrics who had invented udder warmers for cows or trained their pet dogs to say ‘sausages’. But surely the oddest collective ritual came on Saturday afternoons between the half-time football scores and the classified results on ITV’s *World of Sport*, when Dickie Davies introduced the wrestling. ‘Ideally, every bout should tell a little tale,’ wrote the wrestler Jackie Pallo in his revealingly titled memoir, *You Grunt, I’ll Groan*.⁴ In each match, the two wrestlers would suffer their share of being held in a headlock that had them slapping the canvas in mock agony, before the baddie, usually identifiable by his leotard, lost – a narrative so simple it could be understood with the sound turned down.

As I have since discovered, there were regular tabloid exposés about the wrestling, so the millions of viewers who did not know it was faked must simply not have wanted to know. The French critic Roland Barthes once observed that wrestling was not a sport at all, but a moral drama in which the audience looked for ‘the pure gesture

which separates Good from Evil, and unveils the form of a Justice which is at last intelligible'.⁵ It did not matter that the result was fixed, only that good was seen to triumph.

Luke Haines's 2011 album, *Nine and a Half Psychedelic Meditations on British Wrestling of the 1970s and Early '80s*, made while his father was ill as a way of remembering watching *World of Sport* with him, captures perfectly this sense of the wrestling as its own weird, beguiling and wholly unironic world. Haines recorded the album in his living room with a cheap 1980s keyboard, interweaving old footage of *World of Sport* moments such as Kendo Nagasaki (aka Peter Thornley from Stoke) being ceremonially unmasked at Wolverhampton Civic Hall in 1977 with fantasies like the sackcloth-wearing, wild-bearded wrestler Catweazle's false teeth flying out of the TV and landing at Haines's feet. The wrestling was an extreme example of what was true of most television when I was growing up: it demanded total immersion in its symbolic universe, for looking at it with an outsider's eye would break the spell and render it meaningless and ridiculous. Television performed a mostly benign confidence trick, convincing us that we believed the same things and were part of the same armchair nation.



This belief in a Pax Britannica of three-channel television, when everyone sat in front of the same programmes, is largely a myth – and like many myths it says as much about our current preoccupations as it does about the television we watched a generation ago. It is partly a lament for the seemingly lost capacity of multichannel television to create shared moments of empathy and understanding. This belief is part of a wider sense that the nation once possessed a common culture that has now fragmented, a persistent idea in British cultural history running all the way from *Piers Plowman* to T. S. Eliot. Nostalgia being a malleable emotion, each age produces its own version of this myth: many blamed television itself for destroying older forms of

SWITCHING ON

communal life when it arrived in most homes in the 1950s. ‘If there is one thing certain about “the organic community”,’ the cultural critic Raymond Williams once wrote, ‘it is that it has always gone.’⁶

In memories of television, nostalgia often mixes with condescension. It is customary to belittle the experience of watching early TV, in a way that perhaps I have also been guilty of in my own recollections, above. The set took ten minutes to warm up. The screen was as small as a postcard. And when it wasn’t switched on, the TV was hidden away guiltily behind a double door like a triptych, or modestly covered with an antimacassar. It was a time, according to the journalist A. A. Gill, summarising this orthodoxy, ‘when the whole world was in 405 lines, took two minutes to warm up and vanished into a white dot at 11 p.m. after a vicar had told you off’.⁷ We like to think of early television watchers as naïfs, responding with wide-eyed amazement to what seem to us absurd or antediluvian programmes, from dull monochrome panel shows to the Saturday afternoon wrestling. Thus we unconsciously patronise the viewers of the past, as if we were colonialists wondering at the strange habits of a remote tribe.

This mixture of nostalgia and condescension fails to convey how rich and deep the history of British television is, much of it now surviving only as listings. Even in its early years, when broadcasts took up just a few hours a day, the relentlessness of daily television, combined with the fact that it was mostly live and unrecorded, meant there was far too much of it to enter the sorting house for shared memories. Leafing through old copies of the *Radio Times* and *TV Times* is a melancholy activity, an entry into a lost world of spent effort, used-up enjoyment and forgotten boredom. Most television, to which talented, energetic people devoted months or years of their lives, has left momentary imprints on our retinas and slightly less momentary imprints on our brains before vanishing into the uncaring ether.

Any history of watching television inevitably becomes a meditation on the nature of collective memory, for a programme that millions once watched but which has now faded into the atmosphere like a dream is a neat encapsulation of the elusive quality of memory itself. The most banal TV from the past can be extraordinarily evocative. Numerous

websites exhaustively dedicate themselves to collating and curating the old connective tissue of television, from continuity announcements to channel idents; there is even a group of devotees that meets every Easter in Leominster to share their enthusiasm for the design aesthetic and incidental music of the television test cards. But most television remains forgotten, and those bits that are remembered are often surrounded by wishful thinking and selective amnesia. What is remembered and forgotten is as revealing as the ‘real’ history of watching television, which is ultimately too vast and unrecorded to be told.

Here, for instance, is one piece of both collective and selective memory. On Saturday 13 November 1965 at 11.19 p.m., on the late night satire show *BBC-3*, the host, Robert Robinson, asked the critic and literary manager of the National Theatre, Kenneth Tynan, if he would stage a play in which there was sexual intercourse. ‘Oh, I think so certainly,’ replied Tynan, before adding as a seemingly casual afterthought, ‘I mean I doubt if there are very many rational people in this world to whom the word “fuck” is particularly diabolical or revolting or totally forbidden.’ This, at least, is the gist of what Tynan said; it was live TV and no one was writing it down. Tynan’s stammer, *Private Eye* said cruelly, had created the first thirteen-syllable four-letter word in history.⁸ The studio audience briefly inhaled its collective breath and the discussion carried on regardless.

The moment was too late for the Sunday newspapers but Monday’s were filled with righteous anger. William Barkley of the *Daily Express* called it ‘the bloodiest outrage I have ever known’ and accused Robinson of wearing a ‘lecherous leer’ after the word was uttered. Barkley, who had stayed up with his family to watch *BBC-3*, said it was the first time he had ever heard the word used by ‘an adult male in the presence of women’. His wife switched off the television straightaway and said to their 28-year-old daughter, ‘It’s time you went to bed.’ Mary Whitehouse, of the newly formed National Viewers’ and Listeners’ Association, said Tynan should have his bottom smacked. ‘The BBC should restrict its time to those communicators who are acting from *noble* motives, if the word still has meaning amid the indifference and irresponsibility thrust down our unwilling throats,’ wrote eight